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Tricia

V. Dion

Special Fall Travel Section Inside: Byways of Eastern Europe

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rappers

SAMPLING THE SCENE IN PROVIDENCE

rappers

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PROVIDENCE RAP MUSICIANS HAVE A LOT TO SAY. BUT IF THEY CAN'T GET AIR TIME OR CLUB DATES, WHO'S GOING TO HEAR THEIR MESSAGE?

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BY V. DION HAYNES

A GREEN '76 Seville makes a skid stop, parking backwards in front of a clapboard cottage on Sumter Street, in Providence's Elmwood, and out pops Eric Xavier Winters.

Winters is hyped. Even though he had to clean out his bank account today, Winters has bought a classic auto for just $700.

The Cadillac — with its passenger-side quarter-panel window patched with cardboard, its right cornering light hanging down, and its right brake light burned out — has seen better days. But no matter. Winters sprints into his parents' house to get buckets and rags, with which to wash his prize.

His mom, sitting in front of an electric fan, trying to beat the damp summer heat, razzes him about his sagging Bermuda shorts and his penchant for buying junk on wheels.
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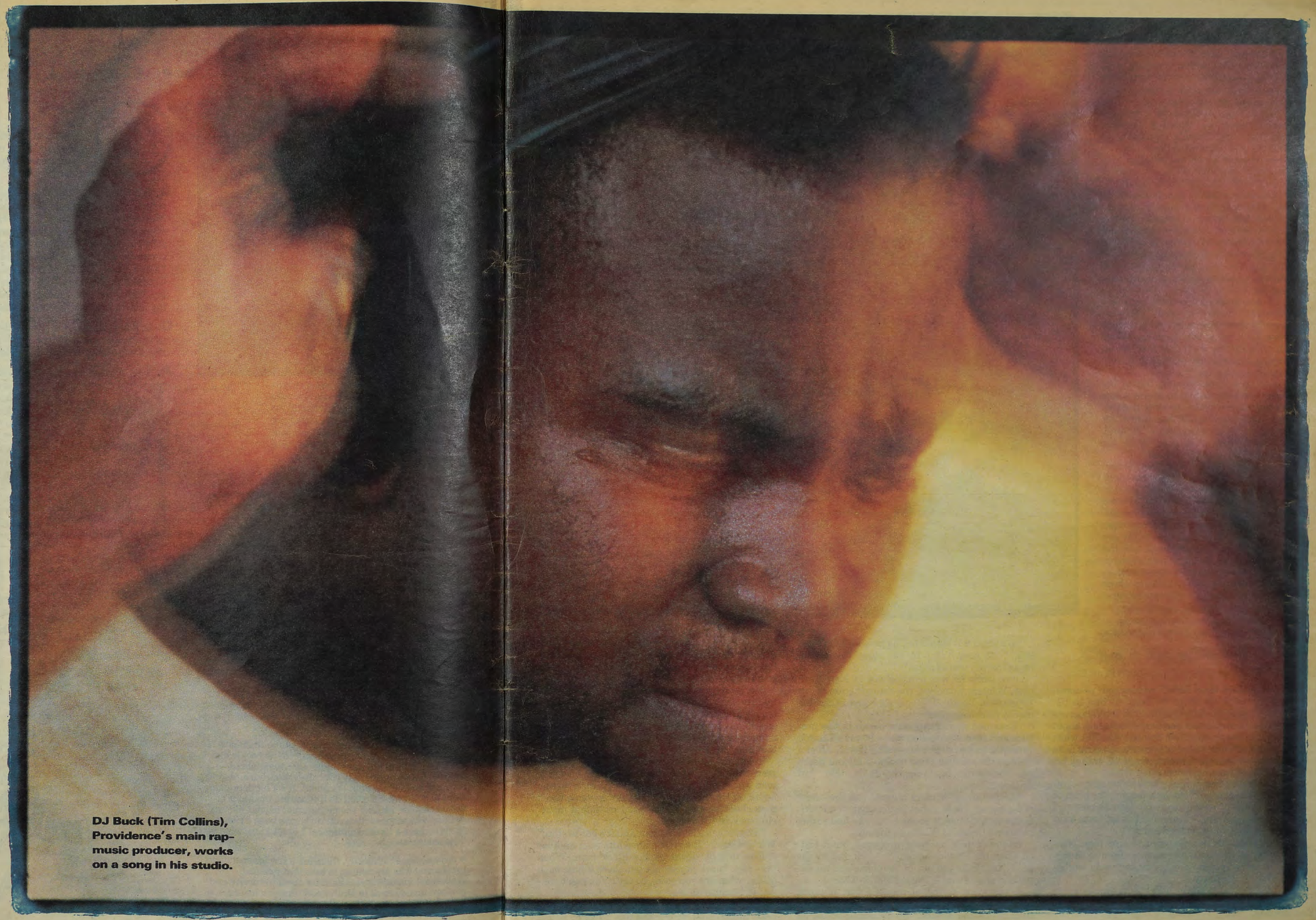
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUBEN W. PEREZ



DJ Buck (Tim Collins), Providence's main rap-music producer, works on a song in his studio.

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A moment later Winters is dragging a rag over the Cadillac's peeling vinyl roof and remarking that the car is quite a contrast to the kind of rides he was driving just two years ago.

Noting the children all over the neighborhood — pedaling bicycles, jumping rope, tossing baseballs — Winters also remarks on how just two years ago the block was overrun with people buying and selling all kinds of dope: a traffic that he helped bring.

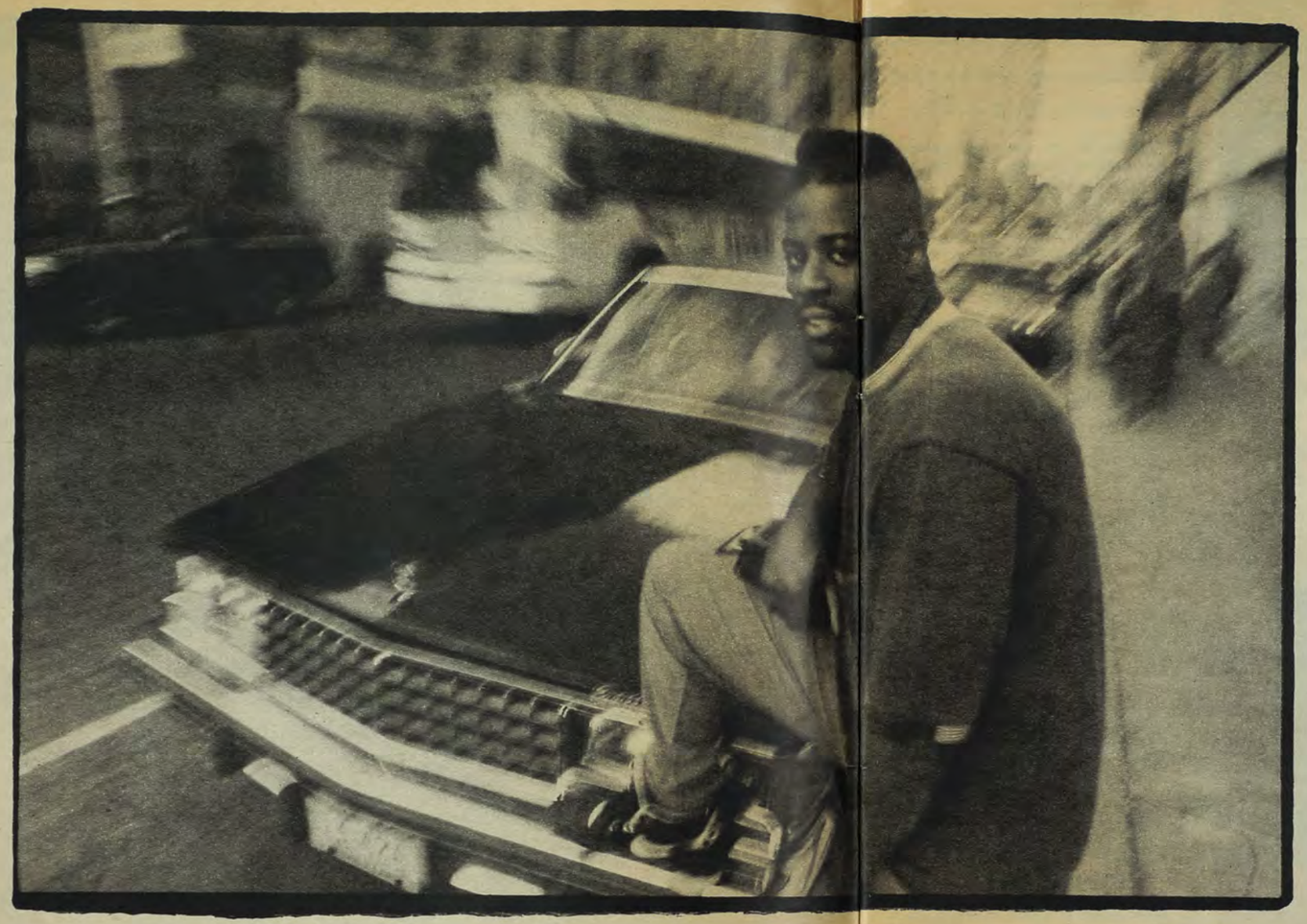
Reared in a solidly middle-class family, with both mother and father employed and living at home, Winters was given love, discipline, and all the material things he needed. But the lure of quick money, flashy sports cars, and the fast life drew the teenager to the streets, where he began selling cocaine and heroin.

"I was grossing like seven or eight thousand dollars a week," Winters says. "I blew the money taking trips to New York, going out, spending money on girls, buying a car and wrecking it, buying another car, wrecking it, and buying another car."

But now, three months out of the Adult Correctional Institutions, where he served two years for drug dealing, the husky 21-year-old has turned his attention to steering youth — especially black males — away from the streets. His vehicle: rap music.

Under the stage name King Xavier, Winters — like several other rap musicians in Rhode Island — writes, performs, records, and promotes his own rap songs. Speaking in rhyme over music with a hard beat, he communicates his experience of the streets. In raw words, he preaches to people who live in the ghettos — especially African-Americans and Spanish-Americans — urging them to unify, to learn about their culture, and to fight oppression:

Times are changing, rearranging,
But still the white man's reigning.
White supremacy's been lingering so long,
So I developed my mind to grow strong.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRIS CRAIG

WINTERS HAS BEEN writing and performing rap music for about 10 years. At first he figured rapping would be his ticket to the glamorous life and he wrote and performed rap songs about partying — the good life, the fast life. But when his compositions failed to garner a response from record companies, Winters, at age 15, shifted his attention to dealing drugs.

"I seen the drug trade — making money — you know what I mean?" he says, tugging the brim of his green cap, which covers his fade haircut and asymmetrical part. "I said, 'Well, that looks kind of easy.' And I just jumped into it."

Although his parents tried to stop him, Winters set up shop in their house, on Sumter Street. He supplied goods to other dealers, who started trading on his block.

Meanwhile, Winters had begun appearing at shows in which anti-drug rap music was performed.

"In a way I felt stupid telling people, 'Don't use this,' " he says. "But in the same token, the (drug) money was so right."

Once while he was hanging out in New York City, Winters witnessed the assassination of his 19-year-old buddy, E-Rock, who was skimming money from a supplier:

"Everyone was sitting on a bench in the projects and then a car rolled up — it was all tinted windows, so you didn't know who it was. All of a sudden the window came down — all you heard was ba-da-da ba-da-da ba-da-da. He just dropped."

Another time, Winters himself was the target of a gunman. He was shot in the thigh at a Providence nightclub by a young man, who had earlier been shot by one of Winters's friends.

Winters's drug business prospered, but it ended when the Providence police — alerted by the heavy traffic in and out of his house and his expensive sports cars — busted him, in 1988.

It was while he was at the ACI that Winters, who was housed in Maximum Security, decided to turn his life around. He devoured books on black history and law and novels by such authors as Herman Melville and Günter Grass. He earned his high-school-equivalency diploma and took some college courses.

But he mostly spent time examining his community and the world. And as a result, his music changed. Winters then began writing his hard-edged rap songs about racism, drugs, and violence in the streets — a topic that especially troubles him.

In just the past few weeks, Winters says, he has seen two people shot dead. He saw a Hispanic man shoot another Hispanic man at a phone booth on Broad Street, and he saw a young black man shoot another in the head outside a nightclub on Eddy Street.

"The violence is ridiculous and it's got to stop," Winters says. "It's giving the white man another reason to look down on the black man. When they say, 'Black people are out there killing each other,' what are you going to say? You can't contest it, because we are."

Most of the shootings, he says, are the result of petty arguments. He is asked why so many young people seem to place so little value on life.

King Xavier (Eric Xavier Winters), of Providence, writes rap music with a message.

"I think it's just the way that people are coming up — in poverty, in strife, you know what I mean? People don't really care, they have no value for life, because they really got nothing out of life. What I noticed is the people who are brought up with families who provided for them value life a little more. But the people who grew up in poverty, with hardly anything — those are the people who would take your life."

Calling for youths to pick up microphones instead of guns, Winters recites the words from one of his songs:

That's my boy, I know that he got my back.
I've been shot, but I haven't shot them back.
But I will, not with a gun but with intelligence.
Stop the violence, it has no relevance.
A brother shot another, now that leaves one brother dead.
But still he's wearing green, black, and the color red.
Why do you wear that? You know what it means, my brother. →

INTRODUCTION TO RAP

BY TRICIA ROSE

I SUSPECT THAT many people have an image of rap music that is confused. On the one hand, it has been virtually impossible to escape the media's coverage of the controversy over obscene lyrics used by the popular group 2 Live Crew. On the other hand, it has also been almost impossible to avoid the Las Vegas - style image of M.C. Hammer selling sneakers for British Knight; his album *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* is the number-one pop album in the country. What gives? Do these guys reflect the range of rap music? No, absolutely not.

First, the media's accounts of rap music are the primary source of confusion. Focusing only on the extremes, the press has given the impression that "good" rap music is what makes the Top 40 and "bad" rap is the rest of rap music — the stuff you won't hear on the radio. But rap is music much more diverse than just these two extremes.

Rap has gotten a "bad rap" since its inception, in the mid-1970s. The early responses to it were at best condescending— "It's just a fad" — and at worst mean-spirited: "Doesn't that rap music cause violence?" It is sad to say that, even in 1990 — after rappers have almost single-handedly changed the sound of American popular music, supported the most worthy of social causes (such as the anti-apartheid and anti-drug movements), and signaled a rebirth of black pride — rap is still a scapegoat for America's urban ills.

Rap is an important part of black music and black cultural history in general. But trying to find a fixed point of origin for rap music is impossible. Its roots have been variously traced to blues queen Bessie Smith rapping to a beat in some of her 1920s songs; "prison toasts," bawdy epic-style rhymed stories; and the 1960s-style political verse of The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron. Some African-culture historians have gone further back, finding rap's antecedents among African oral traditions. But rap music as we know it today, though sharing traits with all these African-American forms, also has a discrete history of its own.

TODAY'S RAP BEGAN as a street-corner phenomenon. Rhymes recited over popular music were first performed in the mid-1970s in the neighborhoods of the Bronx, in New York City. This style of music was part of hip-hop, a rich urban subculture that also encompasses break dancing and graffiti art. The attempts made to discourage hip-hop, by erasing the graffiti and trying to stop the street dancing, only served to make rap music hip-hop's primary expression. Today, in fact, *hip-hop* and *rap music* are used interchangeably.

As entertainment, teenagers from the most battered areas of the Bronx would take the instrumental disco hits of the day and recite their own rhymes over them — in effect customizing them. They would record their creations and share them with friends, through "beat boxes." Soon rapping became the rage, and clubs would pack kids in with such rappers (or "M.C.s," masters of ceremonies) and deejays as D.J. Kool Herc, Kool Moe Dee, Afrika Bambaataa, Kurtis Blow, Grandmaster Flash, and Grandmaster Melle Mel. Dances and block parties began featuring rappers, and soon "rapping battles" began replacing some of the gang battles that dominated New York in the 1970s.

Deejays would attach their equipment to the power source of street lamps and hold block parties and park festivals highlighted

MORE THAN A FAD, RAP HAS MADE A MARK ON AMERICAN CULTURE.

by rap battles. These experimental deejays knew that the "break" in a record — the part where the rhythm and bass lines were isolated — was what really got the crowd going. So they would buy two copies of the record, cue both up on "dueling" turntables, and play the break over and over, by turning one record back to the break after it had played while releasing the other record on the break at the right moment. The deejays with the most original break beats were the toast of the town (deejays would soak off the record labels to keep the source of their beats secret). Break dancing was the free-style "show all you got" kind of movement that was inspired by the breaks.

And "scratching," involving playing a record backwards — actually treating the turntable as a percussive instrument — was also developed in the parks and clubs of the Bronx.

Back in the early days, there were not many female rappers or deejays. This was in part because hip-hop was a subculture of the late-night streets, not a setting where women generally felt welcome. Nonetheless, such early female rappers as Lisa Lee; the female member of The Funky Four Plus One More; the group Sequence; and Roxanne Shanté were out there hangin' tough.

THE EARLY RAPPERS were primarily party M.C.s, calling on crowd participation with such things as "Let me hear you say *ho ho*! Somebody scream!" They were also boastful storytellers, rapping about their verbal, sexual, and physical prowess. A good

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It means the blood, the land, and, yes, the color.

So stop shooting, ripping, and shut up.

And listen to my DJ Buck cut up.

DJ BUCK, 26, whose real name is Tim Collins, produces Eric Winters's — King Xavier's — records, as well as those of three other Rhode Island rap musicians.

Tonight, he is sitting at the console in his first-floor apartment on Cheshire Street, in the North End, getting to work on a recording with one of his artists, a young man who goes by Brook-B.

"*B bu-bu-bu-bup B bu-bu-bu-bup B bu-bu-bu-bup B bu-bu-bu-bup . . .*" taps the soft drumbeat as DJ Buck's thumb mashes a button on his SP12 four-track synthesizer.

He leans forward and cocks his ear to the turntable, spreading his fingertips across the smooth vinyl and the purple label of the 1977 Rick James album spinning in front of him. When the section he's interested in has played, Buck reverses the record, guiding it counterclockwise. The riff repeats and Buck presses another button, activating a tape machine, which samples a snatch of bass from the tune "Mary Jane."

"*Joong. Joon-joon-joon-joon-joon-joon-joon. Joong. Joon-joon-joon-joon-joon-joon. Joong . . .*" screeches the high bass.

Seated high on a stool in the cramped room, which is dominated by his king-size waterbed, Buck flips some switches to blend the old funk and his new rap rhythms, and the soundtrack is made.

"One, two, three, four," whispers Buck, tapping a foot and pointing a finger. Brook-B, standing beside him with microphone in hand, is ready.

Brook-B's rich baritone, competing with Buck's mix, now blares over two massive speakers.

The two men will toy with the song a few more times before calling it quits tonight. They plan to take the rough cut into a recording studio, to add finishing touches, and then they will ship their product off, in the hopes of attracting interest from a major record company.

Called "It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At," the rap has two messages, says Brook-B.

The song uses profanity and racial epithets for blacks, Hispanics, and whites to depict racism and gang violence. Brook-B says that the explicit language does not reflect his own attitudes, but is used to get through to his audience.

"When you use swear words in a rap record," he says, "you're more or less trying to speak their language. I'm not prejudiced; I'm just saying what's going on out there."

ALTHOUGH a small city, Providence has the same social ills as big cities. Because of this and because there are some talented rappers to make use of this subject matter, Brook-B says that Providence has the potential to become a great rap city. "I'm trying to let everyone know that Providence isn't just something to push around," says the rap musician.

Rhode Island rappers, with their hard-core messages, are heavily influenced by the New York rap scene. Their styles and lyrics contrast sharply with those of the so-called commercial rappers, from California, such as M.C. Hammer, Tone Loc, and Young MC.

The West Coast rappers "don't really say anything meaningful in their songs," says DJ Buck. "They're just saying a bunch of rhymes and talking about silly stuff" — partying and the like.

Even the Southeastern rap music — led in Miami by 2 Live Crew, whose use of obscenity has created a furor (even in Westerly) — pales in comparison with the fiery social commentary contained in the raps done in Providence.

Buck is also producing "Providence versus Providence," Brook-B's composition that will appear on the flip side of his "It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At." The song depicts shootings among gangs on Elmwood Avenue, Rhodes Street, and Wiggins Village, off Cranston Street:

Rhodes Street, the Vill, to parts of P-town,
Sh-- happens, there's a sound.
The fire of a gunshot,
Mach-10s, Uzis let off more than one shot.
Providence kills Providence is the plot.
Journal says another dealer got shot. . . .
Another brother's mother's shedding tears,
All because he likes to hang with the boys.
I get the impression you take guns for toys.
The most I could say is just stop,
Because the story ends when the pistol goes pop.

BROOK BENTON, a.k.a. Brook-B, 21, grew up on French Street, in South Providence, with many of the young men who are now involved in street violence. His parents and a nearby Boys & Girls Club kept him away from trouble.

He says his impartiality helps him get the inside story about street disputes, from all sides:

"I'm friends with everyone, so I can go on Rhodes Street, Reynolds, the Village — I can go to any part, because I never had anything to do with any kind of gang violence. I can go to any street I want and get a point of view from everyone."

Benton's "Providence versus Providence" also touches on how a fight for turf has shattered a friendship.

He talks about Willie Davis and Jose Doctor, both 18, who were buddies. But one was from Cranston Street, the other, from Saratoga Street, and so they found themselves on opposite sides in a drug-trade turf war. Last August 12, Doctor, according to Benton's account (corroborated by police reports), walked up to a car in which Davis was sitting, parked at Eddy and Globe Streets, and began firing at his friend.

"I don't know exactly what's going through these guys' minds when they shoot at each other like that," Benton says. "It's hard to go up to someone that just killed a friend of his and say, 'Why did you kill your friend?' I'm trying to put the song on the radio, and that way maybe I can get a response.

"I think they don't have any idea of what they're doing."

Benton has even arranged for representatives from each faction to rap a verse of the song in his recording.

"We're trying to get them together in this song so that way, in rehearsal or whatever, they could talk to each other and then maybe each side can get to know each other. I'm trying to bring them back together, so that Providence can be safe."

RAP RECORDS are no good unless someone hears them. That means getting air time on the radio. But no black-oriented radio station exists in this state, and the stations that play rap music tend to confine it to such commercial artists as M.C. Hammer.

Yet one station that does play local rap is WRIU, at the University of Rhode Island.

It's Wednesday, the first day of fall classes at URI, in Kingston. The campus is brisk with the patter of sun-tanned students.

Shockmaster Laz, who has taken the day off from his soldering job, arrives at Memorial Union shortly before 3 o'clock. With a record tucked under his arm, Laz is here to press a deejay at WRIU to play his song on the radio.

Wearing black sweat pants and a blue T-shirt, Laz struts past the cafeteria, the game room, the Total Image Hair Salon, and the bookstore, and ascends three flights to the studio.

He has no appointment but introduces himself and hands his record to Ulysses Gallman, who is sandwiched in a closet-sized studio between two turntables and a control board illuminated with rows of flashing green and red buttons. Can Gallman play the record?

"Oh, definitely. Hell, I'll do better than that. I'm going to make you talk, man!"

In moments, Laz is introduced to the world: "Ninety point three FM. Yeah. You got Ulysses and The Wednesday-Afternoon Party Thang. Sitting across from me on the microphone is a gentleman that I've just had the pleasure of meeting. He calls himself Shockmaster Laz and I'm looking at his new twelve-inch single. It's called 'I Feel 4 U.'

"Shockmaster, say hello."

Laz says, "Hi, how're ya doing?" and explains that his record warns about AIDS and criticizes those who discriminate against its victims.

Gallman plops the disc on the turntable and the song fills the airwaves:

. . . Deadly as cancer, stronger than a heart attack,
A-I-D-S, that's the spelling.
All the addicts out there just fell into a trap.
Let's get down to the facts,
And stop this dead in its tracks. . . .

After the record has finished, Laz says he was asked to write and record the song by two recent Brown University graduates who had formed a nonprofit corporation to produce rap records dealing with social issues.

Gallman asks about the music.

"The beat and bass line are taken from James Brown," says Laz. "The congas are from a Spanish record. Since I'm Spanish, I put my Spanish into my music. And the title of the song, as you hear in the breakdown, is 'Aye Bendito.' That means 'I feel for you' in Spanish."

"What's in store for the future?" says Gallman. "Gold, fame, fortune, whatever?"

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'. . . STOP THE VIOLENCE, IT HAS NO RELEVANCE. . . .'

D-Smooth (Danny Sykes) holds his record at Rainbow Records, in Providence. It was a hit in Detroit.

RAPPERS

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"I'm trying to reach my audience, which is a black audience, but I'm trying to reach mainly a Hispanic audience, because I'm Puerto Rican. There's not really any Hispanic rappers out there. That's my goal — and to keep putting out positive messages."

Shockmaster Laz, whose real name is Derrick Colon, brought his brand of rap to Rhode Island four years ago. He is 23 and grew up in the South Bronx, where such gangs as the Savage Nomads, Black Spades, and Sand Men, wearing heavy gold chains draped over cut-up denim jackets, ruled the streets. It was here, in the 1970s, that rap music was born.

The atmosphere was charged, with roving Puerto Rican, black, and white outlaws — as they called themselves — dominating the scene with their turf wars and the graffiti that proclaimed their names. At night, they channeled their aggression into their music.

Colon was terrified, yet fascinated:

"For me, it was scary watching all the fighting and shooting, (but) man, for these guys to know words like that and to rap over beats — over fast beats or whatever — was incredible."

Colon's mother and older sister managed to keep him out of the gangs, but they couldn't stop him from hanging out at Echo Park, where he'd hear the "outlaws" rap over old James Brown records and watch them break dance.

Deejays and rappers — Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, Grand Wizard Theodore, Cool Hulk — sprang up around New York City. Rap music was catching on, and it was quelling some of the gang activity.

"After a while, the gangs just started to disappear," says Colon. "People wanted to party. They were tired of fighting over the territories."

DESPITE THEIR EFFORTS to convey positive messages, the rappers of Rhode Island are finding doors closed to them, because to many people their music carries a negative connotation. The recent effort to prevent 2 Live Crew from performing in Westerly may be the most celebrated instance of the local community's inhospitality to rap music, but many less well known rap musicians have also found it hard to get a club date here anywhere, anytime.

"Rap's getting a bad name, and I think it's racism," says Danny Sykes, who calls himself D-Smooth.

His first single, "Droppin' Smooth Lyrics," is getting heavy air play in Worcester and New York, and it reached number 11 on WDTR, in Detroit. But the 23-year-old Providence native laments that he is better known elsewhere than in his home state.

Almost the only clubs in Rhode Island where rappers perform — and at that only sporadically — are Dennis' Lounge, on Providence's Eddy Street, and the AS220, on Richmond Street. Many clubs, Sykes says, are reluctant to book rap musicians for fear of drawing a rowdy crowd.

Sykes says that he was set in June to perform at a club in Pawtucket. The booking had been made seven weeks in advance, but the day before he was to appear, the club canceled his show.

"Everybody's kind of scared to have it, because they feel as though it's going to bring a lot of violence, which is not true. You have violence at these rock concerts and that story is untold.

"They'll have singers and dancers, but they won't have rap."

G-ROCK, WITH HIS hanging tongue and close haircut, looks like a stepping, spinning rapping version of basketball wizard Michael Jordan.

He opens his mouth and then presses his lips tight; as if in pain, he frowns and drops his glance to his screaming gold-and-black polka-dotted baggy pants, which seem to expand and compress over his shuffling feet and jerky leg motions.

"Say, *ho*!" he implores a crowd of teenagers, children, and adults in India Point Park, at last month's Providence Waterfront Festival.

"Ho!" they say.

"Say it louder!" says G-Rock, waving his arms.

"*Ho*!!!"

"Man, this crowd is hyped," says Today's Specialty, G-Rock's partner. "It's getting into it."

A waft of smoked sausage and onions, sailing on a steady breeze from the Providence River, and cloud-filtered sunshine spill onto the stage. A heavy rhythm and rapid-fire rhymes blare into the crowd, pumping them into a frenzy.

Positive Knowledge (from left: Kevin Amaral, Jesse James McMahon, Alicia Brooks) rehearses in the West End.

And while I'm on the mike, I'm known to get hyped,
And I recite something funky, because I'm a delight!

raps G-Rock, as a teenaged girl in the crowd with long dark tresses and orange slacks pulls her bended arms back, sways her hips, shifts her shoulders, and then claps and kicks — left foot, right foot — on the fourth beat. Her friend with the purple jogging suit and curly light-brown hair mirrors her moves. Two other girls join the chain.

For their next rap, G-Rock and Today's Specialty want the crowd to focus on the message.

"This rap contains explicit language," G-Rock warns. "If I don't use those words, I can't get my message across."

The topic we're discussing is the spread of AIDS.
Almost everybody's getting it nowadays.
It's a problem that has reached epidemic proportion,
Because we're having sex without using precaution.
All you got to do when you get an erection
With a girl wear a condom, so you'll have protection.
It may sound rude but I'm stating a fact.
You can't lose control of your sexual acts.
We've got to stay afloat and begin to think,
Or like the Titanic the human race will sink. . . .

As the music fades, a small boy with a brush cut rushes over to G-Rock for his autograph. In black ink G-Rock scribbles: "To David, stay away from drugs and stay in school. I guarantee you will get what you strive for. G-Rock."

G-Rock, whose real name is Jesse James McMahon, and Today's Specialty, a.k.a. Kevin Amaral, both 17, are two-thirds of Positive Knowledge, one of the youth acts sponsored by the Providence Substance Abuse Prevention Council. The youths, part of the Urban League's Rap-It-Up Rhode Island program, perform positive-message raps all over the state for the Boy Scouts, schools, churches, and other groups.

"By putting them onstage and giving them a microphone you're telling them what they have to say is important," says Otis Read, 36, who directs the program, which he founded in 1988. "They're honest, straightforward, and just come out with bottom-line stuff."

CURIOUS EYES AND bopping heads appear in windows whenever Alicia Brooks, 16, who calls herself M.C. Spyce, and the two other members of Positive Knowledge rehearse their raps in the courtyard. Against a backdrop of bare clotheslines, their bellowing voices bounce off their cement stage and reverberate through the rows of three-story brick buildings that surround them.

It is here in the Codding Court Projects, in the West End — where Alicia lives, with her mother and four sisters — that the teenager sees poverty, crime, and drugs. She hopes her rhymes will make a difference.

Three years ago, Alicia's uncle took a massive hit of crack cocaine; his heart burst and he died. "That's what really put me into rapping," says Alicia. "I have a message to put out to the children. I think some people will stop doing it once they hear the story of what happened to him."

Some are listening. Many children in the project look up to Alicia, saying, "There's M.C. Spyce!" whenever they hear her rapping. Often they repeat her lyrics.

Alicia says she's encouraged by the children. But at the same time she's discouraged by friends she grew up with who are now involved in drugs.

She has been heckled and bullied by youths who don't like what she says. At first she fought them, both verbally and physically, but now she tries to reason with them, or else ignores them, because she feels that fighting contradicts her message. "I told myself, 'I'm supposed to be stopping the violence and I'm bringing it. I'd better take a chill pill, now.' "

Her sister Yvonne Freeman, 23, says that many of Alicia's old friends have abandoned her.

"They're jealous, they're laughing, they're thinking that she's not hip anymore, 'cause she's rapping against drugs," says Freeman, cuddling her one-month-old son, Charles, as she sits on a courtyard bench beside her mother, Naomi Brooks. "If they're dealing, they don't want to hear you say nothing about no drugs. That's negativity toward their business."

Nevertheless, Alicia, who spends up to five hours a night rehearsing, says rapping has boosted her self-confidence.

And it has brought her recognition. Probably the only female rapper in Rhode Island, Alicia — M.C. Spyce — has been asked to perform on a new record, *Playhouse,* by the Boston-based rapper Mike Junzun, and she has also received an offer to record with a New York - based company.

"Things look good," says the young rap musician. "If I make it, I'm still going to do positive things in my raps." ■

V. Dion Haynes is a Journal-Bulletin staff writer. Ruben W. Perez and Kris Craig are Journal-Bulletin staff photographers.

INTRODUCTION

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example of party raps is the first commercially successful rap record, *Rapper's Delight,* by The Sugar Hill Gang, which topped the charts in 1979. But gradually rappers expanded their material to include vignettes of urban-black teen life, some of it poignant and brilliant. In this vein, *The Message,* by Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, opened new territory in 1982.

As rappers' rhymes grew more complex, so did the deejays' equipment. Today digital samplers have all but replaced the turntables. Now if you want a break beat, you can digitally "sample" it off the record, layer it with other sounds, including old and new musical tracks, and loop them endlessly. Such recorded fragments as a scream by James Brown or a famous phrase by a black leader are used as accents; they serve as coded recontextualized cultural memories. One result of incorporating earlier music in rap is that a new demand for some of the older bands has been created.

The range of hip-hop is now almost endless. Rappers from all over the country have created regional sounds, and new styles of rapping keep emerging. There are now political rappers, gangster rappers, Afrocentric rappers, white rappers, Latino rappers, Jamaican rappers, Samoan rappers, British rappers ... each of whom brings unique experiences to hip-hop. Hip-hop dancing is bolder than ever. The music-video market is filled with hip-hop dancers, wearing distinctive clothing. And some rap musicians are writing screenplays; the recent *House Party* was the first critically acclaimed movie with a hip-hop flavor.

Women rappers are now vital members of the hip-hop community. The female group Salt-N-Pepa opened the door for M.C. Lyte, Queen Latifah, Ms. Melodie, Monie Love, and dozens of others. I predict that this brand of black female expression will be increasingly important in the 1990s.

AND YET, in the midst of all this cultural activity, commercial radio persists in treating most rap music as a stepchild, and rap continues to be associated with violence. But the violence that is thus associated has more to do with the rage that oppression produces than with the music.

For rap music is a fusion of technical expertise, the power of the human voice, and the dynamism of black culture. Expressing the concerns and collective memories of a people whose traditions are often ignored, rap is here to stay. ■

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